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**ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY AMONG ETHIOPIAN
IMMIGRANTS IN ISRAEL**

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Abstract

This research focuses on sexuality among Ethiopian adolescent immigrants in Israel, in its most comprehensive expression (WHO, 2002). It builds on the past, investigating male-female relations between adolescents in Ethiopia in order to understand the profound changes these relations have undergone in Israel. It dwells on their attitudes and beliefs towards relationships, love and sex, as well as on their perception of their own sexual behavior, including gender stereotypes, risk taking, use of contraception and HIV/AIDS. These important issues must be understood in the specific context of youth villages (residential schools) in Israel.

Background

Adolescent sexuality and sexual behavior are of great concern worldwide. Due to the decrease in the age of sexual initiation and increase in the age of marriage, young people tend to have more sexual partners in types of relationships with varying meanings, putting them at greater risk for pregnancy and HIV.

Sexuality has been interpreted according to different theoretical perspectives. Biological determinism sustained that there is an internal force or sexual drive within the individual. According to it, sexual urges and instincts are located in people's bodies and cannot be ignored. There are two common essentialist themes embedded in this argument: that universal differences exist between male and female sexuality and that these differences are the result of biological factors that constitute the sex drive or biological determinism. According to this perspective, sexuality is considered not just as an internal force but as one that is predictably stable and similar both across cultures and throughout different historical times (Irvine, 1995).

The cultural influence model represented a significant advance over the previous approach. It is based on anthropological premises of relativism and cross-cultural variability and has served to question the uniformity and inevitability of Western sexual norms and mores (Vance, 1991).

The social constructionist perspective - contrary to the biological determinist or essentialist view which dominated sexuality for many decades - sustains that sexuality is not universal and that biology has a small role in determining sexuality. Sexuality is deeply influenced and constructed by social, political, economical and cultural factors. Therefore, the specific meanings attached to it must be examined at particular historical moments in particular cultures. Based on this view, research attention has been shifting from sexual behavior itself to the social settings within which it takes place and to the cultural rules

which organize it. (Parker & Easton, 1998). Adolescent sexuality is influenced by a complex set of factors, including gender, ethnic group, class and sexual identity. Therefore, the meanings teenagers attach to sexuality and relationships will vary according to different messages and imperatives from their myriad social worlds (Irvine, 1994).

The awareness of the ways in which different communities and cultures structure the possibilities of sexual contact among their members has also drawn special attention to the dynamics of gender power relations, particularly in relation to reproductive health and to the rapid spread of HIV infection among women (Rivers & Aggleton, 1999).

The socio-cultural context of young people's sexuality in urban Africa, in general and in Ethiopia in particular, is also influenced by the clash between traditional values and modernization and its ideals. This is reflected in the conflicts between youth and societies. Cultural norms of premarital virginity, emphasized more for females than males, are still the rule. Nevertheless, the practice of premarital sex among adolescents is widespread, contrary to these norms. Thus, deeply rooted social functions coexist with modern external features (Gueye et al., 2001; Nyanzi et al. 2000; Taffa et al., 2003).

The socialization process within gender identities and stereotypes from early childhood impart different social images of being a boy or a girl worldwide also determining the relative privilege of premarital sexual practice. While the dominant ideologies of femininity in many societies promote ignorance, innocence and virginity, the dominant versions of masculinity encourage young men to seek sexual experience with a variety of partners (Rivers & Aggleton, 1999; Hendrickx et al., 2002; Taffa et al., 2002).

Ethiopian Jews

Ethiopian Jews, known as "Beta Israel", lived in villages in Ethiopia for centuries, mostly in the North Western provinces of Gonder and Tigray. Their traditional life style was similar to their Christian neighbors except for their religious practices and traditions and the fact that, as many of them did not own land, they supplemented their income by traditional occupations such as blacksmithing, pottery and weaving (Kessler, 1996; Kahana, 1977). There was a clear division of labor between men and women. Boys helped out in the fields and girls in household chores beginning around the age of six (Bodowski et al., 1994).

Beta Israel families were extended and monogamous. The community endeavoured to preserve the family framework in the traditional village environment. They were patrilocal and married sons continued living in their

father's village. The family had a patriarchal structure; the honor of adults and elders was highly respected and children were raised in an authoritarian atmosphere. The age of marriage in Ethiopia was young and matches were arranged only after extended inquiries and negotiations conducted with the assistance of religious leaders and community elders. The future bride and groom only met for the first time on their wedding day (Kahana 1977; Nudelman, 1996).

Beta Israel abandoned the familiar life style of traditional rural society in Ethiopia in order to fulfil a dream of generations to return to Jerusalem. Their immigration process was extended, often spending months and even years in camps in Sudan or in Addis Ababa in hard conditions (Feldman, 1998; Parfitt, 1985). The transition to a completely strange, modern and pluralistic life style in Israel affected all life spheres and was often painful for them. This process led to the breakdown of the extended family structure, to changes in gender roles, as well as to the weakening of intergenerational relations. It was also reflected on the disruption of many traditional customs, such as marriage patterns (Bodowsky et al., 1994; Edga, 2000; Banai, 1988).

From the first years of Ethiopian Jews' illegal immigration via Sudan, adolescents were referred to youth villages, which are residential schools often situated in rural settings. These were affiliated with Youth Aliyah, an organization that for almost seventy years has dealt with the absorption and advancement of youth from different ethnic groups, providing a supportive educational environment away from home (Gottesman, 1988). During the past two decades the student population in the youth villages has become extremely multicultural. More than half are immigrants from Ethiopia and the Former Soviet republics. The rest are Israeli-born adolescents, often children or grandchildren of immigrants from many different countries and cultural backgrounds.

The youth village was their first home in Israel for many Ethiopian adolescent immigrants, opening up educational possibilities, which did not exist in Ethiopia or in the absorption (immigration) centers where their families lived. Thus, they learned the new language quickly and their acculturation process proceeded faster than their parents'. Nevertheless, adolescents often feel that they are in a difficult situation. On one hand, they want to integrate into their new homeland and be fully accepted by their peers in the residential schools and at the same time - and to some extent - they are still influenced by the traditional attitudes and beliefs sustained by their parents (Goldblatt & Rosenblum, 2007).

The research questions

The main research questions are derived from the objectives of the study and probed in depth by additional ones.

1. What are the meanings of boy-girl relationships for Ethiopian immigrant adolescents in Israel?
2. What are the differences perceived between relationships in Ethiopia and in Israel?
3. What are the reasons that adolescents engage in sexual activity?
4. What are the motivators and barriers to contraception use among adolescents?
5. How do adolescents perceive the risks (including infection and social aspects) related to HIV/AIDS?

Methodology

Over the past two decades, the anthropology of sexuality has gained impetus due to the advocacy of qualitative methods to inform HIV/AIDS prevention programs and the urgent calls for culturally appropriate interventions, in which the need to give meanings to sex and sexuality issues and not just to measure them, has become increasingly important (Lindenbaum, 1991).

Focus groups were selected as the most appropriate research method to explore a range of opinions on pre-determined topics in a specific social environment, in which participants influence each other in the same way as in real life (Krueger, 1994). Thus, this method was considered suitable for understanding adolescents from culturally diverse backgrounds living in a host country, where they have adapted aspects of their traditional culture to those of their current environment (Halcomb et al., 2007).

The group discussion produced meaningful data and insights that would be less accessible with other methods. Focus groups enabled the study to move from the concept of sexual behaviour, as the product of individual decisions, to the concept of sexuality, as a socially negotiated phenomenon, strongly influenced by peer norms (MacPhail & Campbell, 2001). The group setting often encouraged the adolescents to reveal their thoughts and views on sexuality - including stigmatized issues or topics that may be considered taboo - as they felt comfortable and secure in the presence of peers who share similar attitudes, opinions and behaviour (Kitzinger, 1995).

The study encompassed twelve single-sex focus groups (six for each gender) conducted among adolescents aged 15-18 in six youth villages throughout Israel. They provided insights into the context of peer social relations and dynamics, thus enhancing the understanding of their lived experiences, of how

they negotiate relationships and how they develop coherent sets of meanings from their sexual thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Findings

The aim of this investigation was to elicit a comprehensive understanding of the meanings that boy-girl relationships and sexuality have for Ethiopian immigrant adolescents in youth villages in Israel. Thus, a social constructionist perspective, which sustains that specific meanings attached to sexuality must be examined at particular historical moments in particular cultures, was embraced.

The findings of the study indicate that most Ethiopian adolescent immigrants distinguish three main categories of relationships between girls and boys: friendship, casual relationships and steady romantic ones. The boundaries between them can be fluid and change over a period of time (Abraham, 2002). Love and trust are depicted as the most important qualities in a steady romantic relationship. Sexual activity is also usually considered a part of it, although some girls expressed ambivalence about this, because they fear that their partners may enter a relationship mainly for sex (Nyanzi et al., 2000; Taffa et al., 2002).

Additional reasons - other than love - to engage in sexual activity mentioned by adolescents of both genders include pressure from the partner, peer pressure from members of the same gender, influence of substance abuse, of the environment and of the media. Boys also referred to biological needs, curiosity and fun as motivators for engaging in sexual activities (Aarons & Jenkins, 2002).

Although Ethiopian immigrant adolescents engage in different types of boy-girl relationships in Israel, they prefer a steady romantic one. It represents an emerging pattern of relationship in Israel, which replaces early arranged marriages in Ethiopia (Nudelman, 1996). This kind of steady relationship fulfils the need for love and affection, which is important for youth who live away from home, (Goldblatt & Rosenblum, 2007). Nevertheless, the most important aspect of having a boy-friend or a girl-friend is often the social one. It raises adolescents' status among their peers in the youth village and, in consequence, also has the potential to raise their self-esteem and their feeling of belonging in Israeli society. In addition, steady romantic relationships supply Ethiopian immigrant adolescents with a sense of being a part of the global culture of adolescence, as it is perceived through the electronic media and TV programs, such as soap-operas. This demonstrates how local sexual cultures are caught up within the cross-currents of global processes (Parker & Gagnon, 1995).

Ethiopian immigrant adolescents went through a faster acculturation process than their parents, including changes in behavior and the adoption of norms of Israeli society, and specifically of the adolescent culture in the youth villages. Nevertheless, they are still influenced by the values obtained during their socialization process in Ethiopia and reinforced by their families and their community in Israel (Nudelman, 1996; Goldman, 1999). Although they tend to choose the Israeli model towards boy-girl relationships, they still feel that traditional Ethiopian customs are embedded with important values and that there is too much freedom in Israel (Goldbatt & Rosenblum, 2007).

Adolescents related to virginity as an important value in Ethiopian Jewish tradition which bestowed honor upon a girl's family. It was connected to arranged marriages at an early age and to young people's respect towards the decisions of family members and elders. As opposed to Ethiopia, many consider that it is rare to find a virgin in Israel, where boys meet girls and get involved in relationships without thinking of marriage.

Some of the boys would like to be able to relive their meaningful good memories related to boy-girl relationships in Ethiopia. While also sharing these good memories, girls usually prefer the new situation in Israel, which they consider more favorable towards their own gender. A Western value perceived as important in Israel by both boys and girls, is that a woman is an equal, and is therefore valued more than in Ethiopia.

Notwithstanding the different attitudes expressed on some of the aforesaid issues, almost all adolescents were against arranged marriages and wished to select their partners themselves, as generalized in Israel. Most boys prefer Ethiopian partners, especially when considering marriage. This will enable them to continue with some aspects of their traditional culture and to communicate with their parents in Amharic, according the appropriate cultural norms. These findings coincide with additional studies, that indicate males' preference to marry girls with traditional values, who will behave according to normative Ethiopian gender expectations (Goldbatt & Rosenblum, 2007). Nevertheless some of the males revealed a double standard while choosing partners outside of their community at present, but not later on for marriage purposes (Shabtay, 1999).

Girls were divided on the issue of partner selection. Some of them prefer an Ethiopian partner for cultural continuity as indicated by boys. Nevertheless, others consider that modern values such as love, respect and additional good qualities are more important than their future husband's ethnic background. It was suggested that to marry a non-Ethiopian may also be a way for crossing cultural boundaries and integration (Shabtay, 2001).

The influence of living between cultures is reflected on Ethiopian immigrant adolescents' perceptions and expectations regarding sexuality. Although they tend to adopt relationship patterns perceived as Israeli ones, they often reminisce traditional values, such as virginity and the traditional female script. Adolescents still desire clear boundaries in their lives. Therefore, the past is sometimes depicted as an ideal time and the family and all it represents are highly valued, because they enhance a needed sense of belonging (Goldblatt & Rosenblum, 2007). The need to cope daily with these conflicting cultural contexts also may affect adolescents' perception of their personal identity.

The influence of gender stereotypes was noted throughout this investigation of sexuality among Ethiopian adolescent immigrants in youth villages. In traditional Ethiopian society, gender scripts were very distinct. Beginning from an early age they were internalized in the socialization process, including the culturally accepted sexual roles (Nudelman, 1996; Taffa et al., 2002).

The immigration of Ethiopian Jews to a more egalitarian society in Israel had a strong impact on gender roles, affecting the family structure and the power balance between men and women in general. Although a new Western femininity script is cognitively accepted and embraced by many women, their behavior is still influenced by traditional gender stereotypes. Thus, many of them complete their education and get jobs in Israel, but dress modestly, continue with their traditional Ethiopian duties at home and defer to their husbands in public. As a result, traditional gender roles are still fresh in adolescents' minds and have the potential to influence boy-girl relationships. These findings correspond to similar studies among immigrant adolescents in Europe (Hendrickx et al., 2002).

Traditional sexual gender stereotypes are also quite generalized among Ethiopian adolescents and many agree that it is socially acceptable that boys need more sex than girls. Therefore, this may sometimes even legitimize cases of their infidelity towards their girl-friends. In addition, it is common for boys to pressure other boys, in order to conform to the male gender sexual stereotype, according to which more sexual experience gives them a higher status (Nyanzi et al., 2000; Eyre et al., 1997). It is further enhanced by the prestige game, in which boys tend to exaggerate about their sexual activities in order to build their social reputation in the eyes of their peers (Eyre et al., 1998). This is related to the universal theme of double standards towards sexual behavior and sex roles among adolescents (Ward & Taylor, 1994), which is limiting and oppressive to females, while males were allowed more freedom and assumed to be more sexually active. This double standard also affects Ethiopian immigrant adolescent girls' reputation, which is very important to them. Rumors can ruin a girl's reputation among her Ethiopian

immigrant peers, especially considering that they move in the same social circles. Gossip, whether false or true, passes very quickly from one to another. Thus, since a girl's sexual reputation is constructed by her peers, she can also be labelled a whore or a slut if she is perceived as too assertive or sexually knowledgeable by them or by male sexual partners (Eyre et al., 1998).

Unequal power relations and gender sexual stereotypes influence both the initiation of sexual activity among partners, as well as the negotiation of contraception use. For many young men worldwide sexual persuasion is a legitimate component of the masculine sexual role (MacPhail & Campbell, 2001). Male pressure reflects the legitimacy of traditional (Ethiopian) gender sexual stereotypes and of unequal gender power relations, in which the male is dominant and the girl is passive and submissive (Kibret, 2003). Thus, a girl's ability to influence decision-making, to refuse sex or negotiate the use of condoms is limited (MacPhail & Campbell, 2001; Rivers & Aggleton, 1999).

Female Ethiopian adolescent immigrants indicated that a girl sometimes accedes to her male partner's pressure to engage in sexual relations, not only to satisfy his needs or to prove her love for him, but as a way to hold on to a boyfriend, who otherwise may abandon her (Kumar et al., 2001). Apparently, having a boy-friend may justify engaging in sexual activity, even if a girl does not feel ready for it yet or may just not want to do it. A few girls also noted that sometimes they agree to engage in sexual activity due to social pressure (Shabtay, 2001).

To conclude, the lack of interpersonal communication between partners in Ethiopian culture suggests that adolescents rarely have conversations about decisions concerning sexual activity or condom use (Goldman, 1999; Kibret, 2003). This is enhanced by the difference in perceived gender roles and power relations, which affect adolescent sexuality in general and HIV/AIDS related perceptions and prevention behavior, in particular (Goldman, 1999; Kumar et al., 2001; Rivers & Aggleton, 1999).

Adolescents demonstrated a certain amount of knowledge regarding contraception and the risks of getting pregnant or contracting HIV through unprotected sex (Ben-Zur et al., 2000). Nevertheless a number of barriers to condom use exist. Many of them admitted that they are often embarrassed to bring up the issue of contraception with a partner or are afraid of the gender stereotype attached to such an initiative (for example, a girl who brings a condom is considered a slut). Adolescents engaged in romantic relations, who know and trust their partners often feel that they are not at risk to get infected and therefore have a low level of condom use (Goldman, 1999; Hendrickx et al., 2002; Moore & Rosenthal, 1998). Some boys also believe

that condoms reduce pleasure and influence spontaneity. In addition, loss of control under the influence of alcohol and drugs, as well as lack of availability, may also pose barriers to condom use (MacPhail & Campbell, 2001; Taffa et al., 2002).

The analysis of all the aforesaid indicates that there is a considerable discrepancy between adolescents' knowledge and their sexual behavior. The two most important variables underlying this finding are their low level of perceived vulnerability, as well as the lack of an open communication among couples on issues related to sexuality and sexual behavior.

Most Ethiopian immigrant adolescents acknowledge that the threat of HIV infection is real and dangerous, but they do not perceive themselves as vulnerable to the disease. Many feel that the information they receive about AIDS is not relevant to them personally because they are engaged in romantic sex, or because they do not belong to groups at high risk (such as homosexuals and drug-users), even though the rates of HIV infection are higher among their community compared to the general population in Israel (Chemtob & Grossman, 2004). The denial of personal relevance and responsibility is reflected on their low level of perceived vulnerability, as well as on their risk-taking sexual behavior, such as infrequent use of condoms among adolescents who engage in sexual intercourse (Ben-Zur et al., 2000; Fisher & Fisher, 1998; MacPhail & Campbell, 2001).

Summary

This study explored Ethiopian adolescent immigrants' expectations, attitudes, beliefs and the meanings that they attach to relationships in Israel, as compared to Ethiopia. Most of them have embraced a form of steady romantic relationship, which substitutes the early marriage pattern in Ethiopia. Motivators and barriers for sexual activity and contraception, as well as adolescents' low level of perceived vulnerability towards HIV/AIDS, were explored. The dilemmas they must cope with as young Ethiopian immigrants in youth villages have the potential to influence their sexuality and sexual behavior in Israel.

Contribution of the study

The findings of this study will facilitate the development of a culturally-significant sexual health program for Ethiopian adolescent immigrants in youth villages in Israel, based on the understanding of the range of cultural meanings they attach to boy-girl relations, sexuality and sexual behaviour (Aarons & Jenkins, 2002; Irvine, 1994; Nudelman, 1999).

In addition to promoting healthy relationships and sexual behavior among adolescents through personal empowerment, the program will seek to combine meaningful concepts and issues from Ethiopian Jew's culture with the knowledge and skills necessary to cope with life in complex Israeli society.

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